

## **Hansen's Disease (Leprosy)**

### **What is Hansen's disease?**

Hansen's disease, also known as leprosy, is a chronic disease caused by bacteria called *Mycobacterium leprae*. It mainly affects the skin, nerves in the hands and feet, and lining of the nose. It is not highly transmissible and is treatable.

### **Who gets Hansen's disease?**

Most people cannot be infected by the bacteria that cause Hansen's disease. Those at greatest risk are the family of a person who has the disease but is not being treated or individuals living in countries where the disease is more common. Children are more likely than adults to get the disease. Hansen's disease is rare in the U.S., with approximately 100 new cases per year diagnosed in the country. About 230,000 new cases are diagnosed each year throughout the world.

### **How is Hansen's disease spread?**

Although the mode of transmission has not been proven, prolonged close (e.g., household) contact may contribute to risk. The major source of the bacteria is probably nasal secretions from patients with untreated disease, probably spread through respiratory droplets.

### **What are the symptoms of Hansen's disease?**

The symptoms of Hansen's disease can be very different depending on the type of Hansen's disease and what part of the body is affected. The first signs of Hansen's disease are usually pale or slightly red areas or a rash on the skin. Other symptoms can include numbness in the hands and feet, muscle weakness, nodules on the body and a blocked/stuffy nose.

### **How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?**

The incubation period ranges from 9 months to 20 years.

### **How long can an infected person spread Hansen's disease?**

In most cases, a person will not infect others after a receiving a few days of treatment.

### **How is it diagnosed?**

Hansen's disease is diagnosed by examining a biopsy of the skin.

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### **What is the treatment for Hansen's disease?**

Specific antibiotics can be prescribed by a doctor. Treatment usually involves more than one drug taken for a long time (i.e., months to years).

### **How can Hansen's disease be prevented?**

The best way to prevent the spread of Hansen's disease is early diagnosis and treatment of people who are infected. Household and other close contacts should be seen by a doctor as soon as possible and then every year for five years after contact with a person who has the disease.

### **How can I get more information about Hansen's disease?**

- 1) If you have concerns about Hansen's disease, contact your healthcare provider.
- 2) Call your local health department. A directory of local health departments is located at <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/LHD/index.htm>.
- 3) Visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at [http://www.cdc.gov/nczved/divisions/dfbmd/diseases/hansens\\_disease/technical.html/](http://www.cdc.gov/nczved/divisions/dfbmd/diseases/hansens_disease/technical.html/).